

Simmons proposes bill to honor Vietnam vets

By Tom Breen
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The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. records the names of Americans who lost their lives during the long conflict in Southeast Asia — but not all the Americans who died are memorialized on the monument.

An unspecified number of American military personnel died during the Vietnam conflict and, because of one "technicality" or another, are not included with the 58,299 now on the long black wall that has been hailed as one of the nation's most graceful.

U.S. Rep. Robert R. Simmons, R-2nd District, hopes to change that with legislation he has introduced in Congress along with California Democrat Juanita Millender-McDonald.

The bill, called the "Fairness to All Vietnam Veterans Act," would direct the Department of Defense to prepare a report on the number of military personnel who died without being included in the memorial and on the best way to honor their sacrifice.

Simmons said Friday he isn't sure whether the best way to rectify the situation is to add the names to the wall or to create a separate monument. That would presumably be determined by the Defense Department report, he said.

Simmons, himself a Vietnam veteran, pointed out that there have been changes made to the memorial since it was completed in 1982, including the addition of statues honoring soldiers and nurses.

The bill Simmons is supporting would right a situation in which a space of a few miles kept Vietnam veterans from being honored for their service, he said.

In particular, Simmons has drawn attention to the U.S.S. Frank E. Evans, a destroyer that had seen serious combat off the coast of Vietnam and that was

used in training in the South China Sea.

On the morning of June 3, 1969, the ship was torn in half in an accident with the Australian aircraft carrier Melbourne; 74 sailors on board the American ship died.

Because the ship was determined to be a few miles outside the war zone, the 74 sailors have not been memorialized for the loss of their lives alongside other casualties from the Vietnam conflict.

"It just doesn't seem fair," Simmons said Friday. "You send your son or daughter off to sea and they die as a result of that deployment, but because they were a few miles away from the designated area, they're not honored in the same way."

Bill Thibeault, a Norwich resident and survivor of the Evans wreck, has been advocating that the names of his fellow sailors be added to memorial since he learned roughly three years ago that they were not included on it.

"I was surprised, to say the least," Thibeault said Friday.

Thibeault said he has been told that there is room on the memorial for the addition of 200 more names, but he said that even if the names aren't added to the wall itself, some memorial should be erected for the neglected veterans.

Thibeault, who was 19 years old when the Evans was sheered in half by the Australian carrier, has been fielding phone calls for weeks from reporters, and will travel to Washington in two weeks to appear on a television show with Simmons about the issue.

All the effort will be worth it, Thibeault said, if the sailors he served with get their names added to the monument to America's Vietnam-era fallen.

"I want to see the 74 men that we lost that day get recognized," he said.